

## **Sustaining the *Fin-de-Siècle* Attack: A Diachronic Approach to *Salomé*'s Visual Paratext from Beardsley to Yamamoto**

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### **Abstract:**

Resembling Japanese print patterns, Aubrey Beardsley's decadent and grotesque black and white illustrations illuminated Oscar Wilde's radical tragedy, *Salomé* (1891), while simultaneously commenting on it. Beardsley's *Salomé* illustrations were not mere embellishments conceived in a purely decorative form, but produced meanings by virtue of their contingent and intratextual relationships. Art, like language, can benefit from a corresponding semiotic process of analysis. For this reason, this study approaches *Salomé*'s illustrated edition from a diachronic perspective in order to explore its potentials and limitations. First and foremost, this paper elucidates the intrinsic ambiguity that resides in the visual aspects of *Salomé*'s original paratext before providing a diachronic analysis with a view to explain the subsequent diminishing of *Salomé*'s illustrated narrative over the following century. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate how Beardsley's illustrations have inspired contemporary artists, this paper concludes with an examination of Japanese artist Takato Yamamoto's 2005 illustrations of *Salomé*. From the 1894 English edition to the 2011 publication, the passage of time reveals how illustrators have abandoned *Salomé*'s early decadent aesthetics and departed from Beardsley's skilful intratextual dialogue with Wilde's text. On the other hand, Yamamoto seems to look back and draw on Beardsley's controversial and troubling idea of beauty to provide a complementary artistic narrative.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, Aubrey Beardsley, Takato Yamamoto, paratext, semiotics, illustration, decorated book, intertextuality, Japanese erotic art

Oscar Wilde's determination to defy English censorship by publishing *Salomé* in the original French in February 1893 produced one of the most significant endeavours by a writer in a foreign tongue. When the Examiner of Plays, Sir Edward Pigott banned *Salomé*, citing an old law that forbade the depiction of Biblical characters on stage, Wilde was not discouraged. The author charged forth with the publication giving full reign to his creative enterprise. If the constraints of a 'philistine' censorship were to halt the theatrical production, Wilde's tenacity would give birth to the book's publication. *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* was to become Wilde's greatest and most unforgettable opening night performance. The following year, in 1894, *Salomé*'s textual ambiguity was heightened

due to the much-contested English translation by Lord Alfred Douglas coupled with the intratextual polysemy conveyed by Aubrey Beardsley's accompanying illustrations<sup>1</sup>.

Resembling Japanese print patterns, Beardsley's decadent and grotesque black and white illustrations illuminated Wilde's Symbolist text while simultaneously commenting on it. An artist of extreme originality, Beardsley blended horror and beauty as he engaged in a hybrid form of combining drawings with text. Beardsley's *Salomé* drawings are not to be seen as mere embellishments conceived in a purely decorative form, but as capable of producing meanings by virtue of their contingent and intratextual relationships.

In *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books* (1995), Lorraine Janzen Kooistra contemplates "aesthetic judgments on the degree of graphic or literary excellence and evaluations of image/text compatibility (that) give way to analytical descriptions of verbal/visual interaction" and claims that "illustration always works with the text to establish meanings and direct interpretations for the reader" (4)<sup>2</sup>. When considering Kooistra's idea in relation to Beardsley's pictorial interpretation of Wilde's text, we notice a profound degree of intratextuality as the illustrations enhance the ambiguity of Wilde's pluralistic poetics.

The relationship between word and image provides further interpretive possibilities as the reader engages in an intersemiotic decoding of both the play's text and its illustrations. Umberto Eco's theory of the open work as formulated in *Opera aperta* (1962), according to which "every work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit or implicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to (a) virtually unlimited range of possible readings" (1989, 21), allows one to better understand Beardsley's illustrations. Beardsley's original creation of provocative and thought-provoking drawings provides a variety of possible readings. What Wilde achieved in words, Beardsley achieved in pictures.

According to Eco, a work of art has the same structural characteristics as a language. The work of art "cannot be a mere 'presence'; there must be an underlying system of mutual correlations, and thus a semiotic design which cunningly gives the impression of non-semiosis" (1976, 271). Eco's notion seems even more relevant when applied to Beardsley's *Salomé* drawings. Beardsley's art shows a mode of interconnecting meanings and symbols on various discourse levels. Although such elements appear "*ambiguously* organized" (Eco 1976, 271), they "are not realized at random but follow a *precise design*" as "both the normal and the ambiguous devices within a given message exert a *contextual pressure* on both the normal and ambiguous devices within all the others" (Eco 1976, 271). The arrangement of text and image in *Salomé's* English edition provokes an interpretation with the multiple meanings on its correlative.

One cannot overemphasize the relevance of awarding legitimate attention to Beardsley's juxtaposition of text and image as the reader discovers a freedom of analysis. However, the drawings of contemporary artists tend to depart from Beardsley's visual accompaniment to Wilde's play, their work offering purely decorative images that do not necessarily relate to Wilde's text. Illustrations

produced by contemporary artists often appear ornamental rather than complementary, neglecting to provide a sound visual narrative to the play.

Art, like language, can benefit from a corresponding semiotic process of analysis. For this reason, this study approaches *Salomé's* illustrated edition from a diachronic perspective in order to explore its potentials and limitations. First and foremost, this paper elucidates the intrinsic ambiguity that resides in the visual aspects of *Salomé's* original paratext before providing a diachronic analysis with a view to explain the subsequent diminishing of *Salomé's* illustrated narrative over the following century. This study begins with the original English 1894 edition *Salomé A Tragedy in One Act: Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde: Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley* before turning our attention to two very distinct illustrated editions published over the following century: *Oscar Wilde Salomé Newly Translated by Vyvyan Holland Engravings by Frank Martin* (1957) and *Oscar Wilde Salomé A Tragedy in One Act Translated by Joseph Donohue Illustrated by Barry Moser* (2011). Furthermore, in order to demonstrate how Beardsley's illustrations have inspired contemporary artists, this paper concludes with an examination of Japanese artist Takato Yamamoto's 2005 illustrations of *Salomé*. From the 1894 English edition to the 2011 publication, the passage of time reveals how illustrators have abandoned *Salomé's* early decadent aesthetics and departed from Beardsley's skilful intratextual dialogue with Wilde's text. On the other hand, Yamamoto seems to look back and draw on Beardsley's controversial and troubling idea of beauty to provide a complementary artistic narrative.

The methodology employed in this study to probe the multiple indeterminacies residing in Wilde's *Salomé* is a combination of Umberto Eco's hermeneutic theories of textual cooperation as delineated in *Opera aperta* (1962)<sup>3</sup>, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979). Applying Eco's concept of an open work allows the opportunity to chart ways in which Wilde's *Salomé* can be systematically interpreted and understood paying particular attention to the reader's essential role in the process of constructing interpretative meaning. A close analysis of three rather distinct publications will reveal the fate of aesthetic ambiguity in *Salomé's* accompanying illustrations.

Furthermore, in order to illustrate the persistence of Beardsley's influence on Victorian literature and culture in our contemporary society, Yamamoto's 2005 *Salomé* illustrations demonstrate the dynamic influence of Victorian canonical works in current aesthetic representations. Yamamoto has yet to publish an illustrated edition of Wilde's *Salomé*. However, he is one living illustrator in particular who possesses Beardsley's diegetic use of drawings to provide his own narration of the *Salomé* story and additionally engage the reader in an innovative multiplicity of interpretations. While remaining faithful to *Salomé's* poetic and visual obscurity, Yamamoto, within the context of his cultural inheritance, pushes the taboo of erotic art to the extreme. Although perhaps not unique to the Japanese tradition of depicting images of women in severe and sexually explicit drawings, Yamamoto's translation of the *Salomé* story transgresses the boundaries of the illustrated book. This study demonstrates the way in which modern artists provide a visual

accompaniment to Wilde's play. While some artists offer purely decorative images, which do not necessarily relate to the author's text, Yamamoto resonates with Beardsley's strange beauty and his desire to explore the aesthetics of ambiguity.

### 1. Salome and the Power of the Visual Paratext

Ada Leverson, the eccentric novelist whom Oscar Wilde affectionately named "The Sphinx", was enamoured with Charles Ricketts's 1893 design for John Gray's *Silverpoints*. In the preface to her *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde*, published in 1930, Leverson's passion for maximising the decorated book's visual and aesthetic effect upon the reader became the catalyst for the reader's intimate response to the play. The limited first edition of *Salomé* was therefore the visualisation of the play's "unwritten thoughts":

There was more margin; margin in every sense of the word was in demand, and I remember looking at the poems of John Gray (then considered the incomparable poet of the age), when I saw the tiniest rivulet of text meandering through the very largest meadow of margin, I suggested to Oscar Wilde that he should go a step further than these minor poets; that he should publish a book all margin; full of beautiful unwritten thoughts, and have this blank volume bound in some Nile-green skin powdered with gilt nenuphars and smoothed with hard ivory, decorated with gold by Ricketts and printed on Japanese paper, each volume must be a collector's piece, a numbered one of a limited "first" (and last) edition: "very rare." He approved. (Quoted in Frankel 2000, 1)

Leverson's powerful imagination in visualizing the aesthetic beauty and artistic possibilities of the decorated book reignited the fire of Wilde's dancing princess as she remerged from the flames of banishment. Wilde turned to an ornate and embellished presentation of his work as retribution for the play being banned. In this respect, the first published edition of *Salomé* was a theatrical performance.

Wilde's bold venture managed to challenge Victorian philistine sensibilities with the addition of Beardsley's obscure and cryptic depictions. The English edition ushered in an audacious new dimension to Wilde's drama as readers could discover their freedom of analysis. With the interaction between the text and the image, a more nuanced analysis began to emerge.

As we commence an examination of the publication's ability to inspire a semiotic dialogue we notice that before reading the play's opening line, the reader is already drawn into a world of mystique and ambiguity by *Salomé's* paratext<sup>4</sup>. Beardsley's deep understanding of *Salomé* is portrayed by his unique and masterful parody of sex and gender. Such an assault on the senses provides a window into Beardsley's interpretation of Wilde's text as he incites the reader to take the initiative to make "a conjecture about the text's intention" (Eco 1992, 64). Considering that Eco's hermeneutic theory is concerned with three types of intention: *intentio operis* (the text's intention), *intentio auctoris* (the author's intention) and *intentio lectoris* (the reader's intention), the *Salomé* reader engages in a variety of legitimate readings through an examination of Beardsley's illustrated

paratext. The semiotic codes within the text are illuminated through the *intention* of *Salomé's* ambiguous paratext. In other words, the intention “is not displayed by the textual surface... One has to decide to ‘see’ it” (Eco 1992, 64). Therefore, “it is possible to speak of the [para]text’s intention only as a result of the conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the [para]text’s intention” (Eco 1992, 64).

When one is confronted with the paratextual elements of the published English edition of *Salomé*, the level of ambiguity is intensified. Genette explains that the paratext “marks those elements which lie on the threshold of the text and which help to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers” (Allen 2011, 100). However, *Salomé's* notion of openness is reinforced due to the fact that its paratextual reception is in a sense, *uncontrollable*. It remains difficult for the artist to manage the reception of the text due to the extreme multiplicity of *Salomé's* paratextualities. Strictly speaking, the published play’s paratext initiates diverse interpretative possibilities as the *Salomé* reader is thrust into the mysterious and the unknown by the intratextual elements of Beardsley’s cryptic illustrations. In this manner, intrigue continues to beckon the reader as he or she meditates on the intricate artistic components that furnish Beardsley’s work with multiple signifiers. The reading experience is hence enhanced as the varying degrees of interpretations are derived via the paratextual reception that invites the reader to construct textual meaning. Constructing textual meaning through the play’s paratextual features supports Genette’s claim that the paratext is in itself a text (1997, 7).

Genette’s conceptualisation of the paratext includes the *peritext* and the *epitext*. For example, *Salomé's* peritext consists of the play’s title, the list of persons of the play and the list of pictures by Aubrey Beardsley. The play’s epitext consists of the controversial reviews of the French original, the scandalous banning of the play’s opening, interviews with the author, letters from his immediate circle of friends, publicity announcements and “other authorial and editorial discussions – ‘outside’ of the text”<sup>5</sup> (Allen 2011, 100). Genette explains:

The paratext consists as [the] ambiguous prefix suggests, of all those things which we are never certain belong to the text of a work but which contribute to present – or “presentify” – the text by making it into a book. It not only marks a zone of transition between text and the non-text (“*bors-texte*”), but also transaction. (Quoted in Allen 2011, 100)

When applying a semiotic reading of Wilde’s choice of title and title page offers a fascinating insight into the play’s paratextual features. *Salomé A Tragedy in One Act: Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde: Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley* (Fig. 1) is a multilayered and complex directive of ambiguity. As previously mentioned, if the paratext is “not *the* text, it is already *some* text” (Genette 1997, 7), we can approach *Salomé's* paratext as a text in itself.

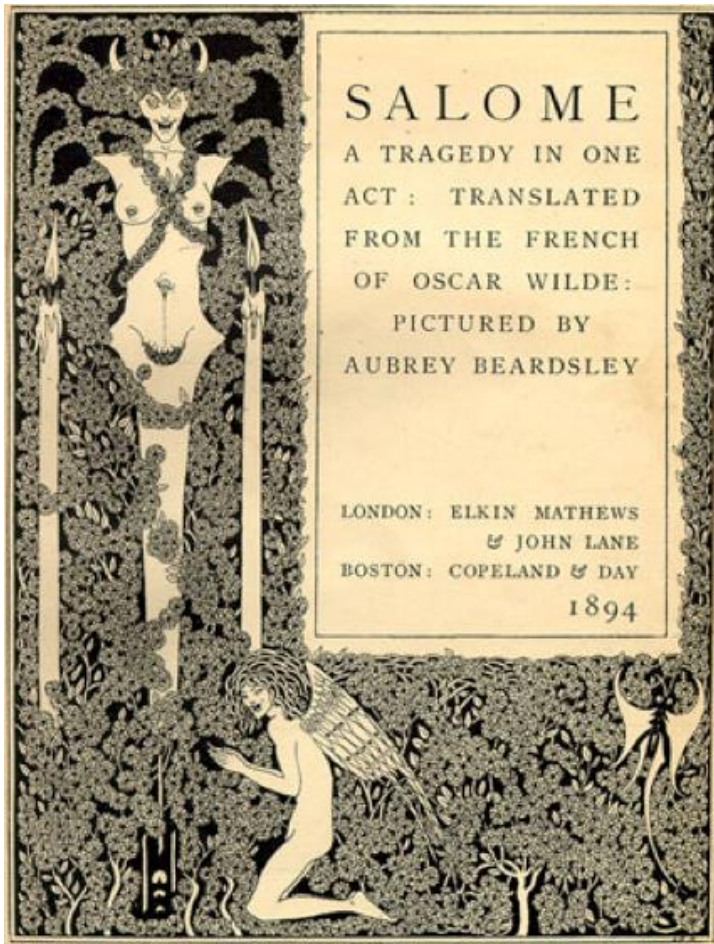


Fig. 1. Aubrey Beardsley: *Title Page* (1894)

The title “Salome”<sup>6</sup> instantly captures the attention of the reader to venture into decadent aesthetics and immediately informs the addressee of the author’s departure from previous treatments of the biblical story. In the illustrator’s hands, Wilde’s dancing princess becomes associated with a satanic element as Beardsley’s horned bare chested androgynous figure sinisterly smiles whilst entangled in an intricate garden of evil. Nestled amongst the hellish flora and fauna, the sexually ambiguous figure appears to be mockingly hanging on a cross as the horned pinnacle replaces Christ’s crown of thorns. The figure is elevated

between two lighted candles presiding over an altar in a blasphemous act of replicating a Christian mass. Beneath the fiendish figure, kneels a naked demonic cherub. Hands clasped in the repose of prayer, the ambiguous winged angel attracts yet repels as it forms a private and intimate connection to the reader.

Beardsley’s creation of the title page gains a further degree of ambiguity. His original submission included the disturbing addition of male genitalia to present the demonic figure as a hermaphrodite. Placating to Victorian sensibilities, publishers Matthew and Lane forced Beardsley to reproduce a sanitised version in order to remove the male penis, eliminating the offending member. Assuming the horned naked figure represents Salomé, Beardsley masterfully encapsulates the dancing princess’s characteristic indeterminacies. In Beardsley’s treatment of the biblical myth, Salomé is the metaphorical hermaphrodite *par excellence*. She embodies both masculine and feminine personality traits as Beardsley oscillates between both sexes to greet the reader with a perplexing notion of gender ambiguity. Alluding to such gender indeterminacies in the title page immediately thrusts the reader into Salomé’s den of iniquity. Armed with the aforementioned signifiers, the reader is presented with a multitude of conflicting ambiguities, which ultimately find their voice in the proceeding acts of degeneracy. Wilde’s Salomé narcissistically relishes debased acts of sexual abjection. Namely, inciting incest, which leads to murder and ultimately to the disturbing act of self-gratifyingly necrophilia.



Fig. 2. Aubrey Beardsley: *The Woman in the Moon* (1894)

Eco's notion of code and decoding and how this concept can also be applied to non-linguistic forms of communication offers the reader a revealing insight into *Salomé's* title page which is aesthetically bolstered by Beardsley's accompanying frontispiece entitled "The Woman in the Moon" (Fig. 2). Throughout the book, Beardsley deliberately uses gender ambiguity, androgynous figures, hermaphrodites, sexual explicit imagery and grotesque fantasy to radically alter the play's referential function. Eco explains that establishing syntactic relationships that violate the usual laws of the code eliminate the possibility for a univocal decoding (1989, 195). Presented with such ambivalence, the *Salomé* reader discovers "that the current code has been violated to such an extent that it can no longer help. The addressee thus finds himself in a situation of cryptographer

forced to decode a message whose code is unknown, and who therefore has to learn the code of the message from the message itself" (Eco 1989, 195).

Aligning oneself with Beardsley's sub-textual imagery, the addressee is confronted with the ambiguity of sexual symbols infused into an ironic and destabilising reading of Wilde's play offering a transforming counter-narrative for *Salomé* by mimicking the author's themes (Kooistra 1995, 132). Nothing could be more faithful to the notion of multiplicity initiated from Beardsley's commentary of Wilde's text than the frontispiece as the confronting image strongly advances the semiotic dialogue of the play. This is clearly demonstrated by the diverse readings it has provoked. "The Woman in the Moon" offers a fascinating example when considering Eco's notion of openness and the role of the reader in interpreting a text or an image. The addressee becomes the co-author in order to complete the meaning established by Beardsley as he himself interprets Wilde's text. In this regard, there is an intratextual triangular effect as the reader participates in an active role of co-authorship. For example, Wilde composes the play; Beardsley interprets the drama in a pictorial form then as the addressee, the reader, interprets the scene's *bi-textual* nature. The placement of the

illustration within the printed book is intriguing in relation to Wilde's text as "The Woman in the Moon" refers to the opening lines of the play:

*The Young Syrian:* How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight!

*The Page of Herodias:* Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from the tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things.

*The Young Syrian:* She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing.

*The Page of Herodias:* She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly. (44)<sup>7</sup>

The frontispiece immediately draws the reader into the opening action of the play and the ambiguities that the first scene initiates. The foundation of this ambivalence is produced by Wilde's employment of a strange symbolist language and the effect of uncertainty that such rhetoric incites. The play begins as the moon entrances the two characters and immediately sets the scene for the profound ambiguity that Wilde threads throughout his entire drama. The image elicits a mixed and divisive range of interpretations. Showalter describes the two androgynous figures as a "frightened couple" (1990, 152) and cites Marcus for praising "The Woman in the Moon" as the only appropriate illustration of Beardsley's interpretation of Wilde's play. However, Marcus's description of the image is unsupported by Wilde's text as she assumes that the androgynous figure is Salomé: "John and Salome [...] cowering in comradely innocence before Herod's face in the moon" (1990, 152). Marcus is not alone in assuming that the male nude is John the Baptist and the feminized figure is Salomé as Dellamora suggests, "John screens Salomé from the lustful regard of Wilde/the Moon-figure. But John's frontal nudity reveals the actual object of Wilde's gaze, namely, the youthful male body. In this instance the screen discloses a specifically male-male sexual desire" (1990, 256).

Gillespie also remains perplexed regarding the characters depicted in the image as he suggests: "presenting unidentified figures in a situation never directly addressed within the play, calls into immediate question any application of linear interpretation" (1996, 148). Walker goes as far as to imply that "the drawing has little connection with the play" (1967 (1957), 26) and Snodgrass cites Arthur Symons who also wrongly identified the human figures to be Narraboth and Salomé suggesting that the frontispiece is "an indication of just how successfully disorienting Beardsley's pictures were" (1995, 276). There appears to be an abundance of possible readings regarding "The Woman in the Moon" thus confirming Eco's theories of interpretation.

Beardsley's depiction of the moon becomes even more ambiguous as he adorns the moon's face with a caricature of the author. What was Beardsley trying to achieve by inserting Wilde's facial features in the moon's face? The moon, or in this case, Wilde's eyes are conspicuously fixated on the couple. The nude male is feminized by his discernable effeminate posture. Furthermore, the clothed figure is extremely feminized by the choice of clothing and feminine attributes. Was Beardsley

conveying a subliminal message in referring to Wilde's clandestine homosexuality? Is the ambiguous facial expression one of envy, desire, shame, secrecy, sorrow, or even despondency?

Beardsley was masterful at playing with the ambivalences Wilde created within the text providing the reader with an invitation to delve into an intriguing world of fantasy. Beardsley's allure of the grotesque incited interpretation and advanced the semiotic and perceptual stimuli before the reader arrives at *Salomé's* opening scene. The title page and adjacent frontispiece complement one another as the multilayered subtextual codes convey the artist's deep understanding of Wilde's work. Set apart from Wilde's text the two images offer their own distinct narrative and bolster the aesthetic and textual intensity of the play.

In contrast, the 1957 publication strays from such an example of open work and diminishes the limitless interpretative possibilities penned by Beardsley. When Frank Martin was commissioned to illustrate Vyvyan Holland's new translation in 1957, his engravings were more decorative and therefore departed from Beardsley's dialogue with the *Salomé* text. For example, the frontispiece of the 1957 publication portrays the dancing Salomé as a lone figure; her arms extended above her head as the movement of her veils conceal her near naked body (Fig. 3). In contrast to Beardsley, there is no use of gender ambiguity, nor does Martin offer a conspicuous and sexual insight into the play's diverse and multi-layered characters. On the contrary, the dancing Salomé performs her exotic dance alone. This one-dimensional figure is restrictive in the sense that she conforms to the cultural view of the subservient female dancer. Her role is to provoke a desire as Martin references the critical dramatic juncture that is the Dance of the Seven Veils.



Fig. 3. Frank Martin: Frontispiece  
Engraving from *Salomé* (The Folio Society, 1957) with permission from the Frank Martin Estate

While the reader can appreciate Martin's intent to portray the infamous dance as he highlights the dancer's feminine beauty and the engraving's power to evoke orientalist imagery already associated with the Salomé story, the frontispiece is controlled in its one dimensional style and therefore presents a closed work. Martin restricts the reader's ability to derive interpretative possibilities.

Highlighting the feminine attributes of the dancing Salomé is a theme which runs through the entirety of Martin's work as the artist continues to make a complete departure from Beardsley's interpretation of gender ambiguity, a central theme

throughout Wilde's drama. Martin's decorative prints reinforce his period's patriarchal notion of masculinized soldiers and subservient female slaves. This is shown, for example, in the untitled image of the Princess Salomé reclining on a chair as near naked female slaves attend to her while the queen Hérodiad leans forward and speaks in Salomé's ear. This engraving would probably be more suited to Flaubert's treatment (*Hérodiad* 1877) in referencing the queen's control as she orchestrates the death of the prophet. Furthermore, in Wilde's reading there are no female characters other than Hérodiad and Salomé, who interact with only males in the play reinforcing Salomé as the central role of the drama. This engraving highlights the fact that Martin's work is mostly decorative and exhibits a limited relationship to Wilde's text.

There is, however, an original aspect in Martin's approach here, as he clearly acknowledged Salomé as the central and leading character of Wilde's interpretation of the Biblical drama. The fact that Martin presents the reader with a portrayal of Wilde's one-line stage direction "Salome dances the dance of the seven veils" (140) in the form of a dancing Salomé reinforces the notion that, for Martin, Salomé's dance is the critical and dramatic turning point of the play. Martin also duplicated the aesthetic affect in the use of the colour green to emphasize and highlight the title, which appears on the opposite page. The dancing princess swirls and bathes gloriously in green tones, which also envelop the moonlit sky, the foliage of the garden and the palace adornments. Martin's 1957 frontispiece is nevertheless paratextually engaging as it proposes an understanding of the artist's interpretation of the play.

Nonetheless, in the original English edition, Beardsley departs from the relative banality of simply depicting an oriental dance in his seventh illustration entitled "The Stomach Dance" (Fig. 4) to produce a very subversive interpretation of Salomé's dance<sup>8</sup>. As the ambiguous and provocative title suggests, Beardsley offers the reader a glimpse into his world of eroticism as he "removes the scene from Judea to the Far East" (Kuryluk 1987, 236). In Beardsley's hands, Salomé becomes the corrupt and distorted ballerina; the antithesis to the graceful and delicate *coryphée* depicted by artists such as Edgar Degas during the second half of the nineteenth century. In "The Stomach Dance," the dancer is no longer portrayed as elegantly poised against a barre but rather she is perverted and aggressive<sup>9</sup>. Here the dance is showcased as a confrontation, the dancing princess staring intently at her entranced viewer. Her powerful seduction is as aggressive as it is sexual. Beardsley depicts a provocative Salomé whose eyes are not downcast to assume a subservient position, a slave to man's desires or as the pawn to her mother's ambitions. Rather, she is a woman who issues a challenge. Her expression is defiant and striking. Beardsley empowers the image to mirror Wilde's emboldening declarations when Salomé affirms: "I am Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judea" (76). Salomé's power and confidence radiates from the image, as her eyes appear threatening. Her seduction is, in a sense, diabolical.

Both Martin and Beardsley depict dance movement as polar opposites. While Martin masterfully captures the fluid movement of Salomé's dance by the circling action of cascading veils and the swirling flow of her dress, Beardsley depicts a smoldering angular movement depicted by a

masculinized stance. Movement is furthermore enhanced by the free-floating roses, which are replicated by her rose adorned breasts. The eroticism displayed by the placement of the roses on her nipples enhances Salomé's blatant sexuality. In this regard Beardsley's image appears threatening to the male viewer while Martin's depiction of the dancing Salomé conforms to the non-threatening stereotype, distancing his work from Wilde's text.



Fig. 4. Aubrey Beardsley: *The Stomach Dance* (1894)

Salomé's monstrous desires are pushed to the extreme in Beardsley's "The Stomach Dance". For example, one should note the presence of the demonic gargoyle that dwells in the underworld. The underworld is made prominent by dividing the image into black and white. Situating the gargoyle in the blackness references his demonic presence. The satanic figure is symbolic of the fires of hell as his hair is also depicted as flames. The monstrous facial expression appears to revel in a certain mysteriously evil intent as the gargoyle plays his instrument providing the musical accompaniment to Salomé's dance. Salomé appears to ascend from the darkness of hell, rising as a seductive phoenix to taunt all who succumb to her wiles. Salomé's brazen sexuality is further emphasized by the gargoyle's presence.

Beardsley's artistic interpretation of the multifaceted Salomé closely resembles the aggressive nature of Wilde's unique positioning of the dancing *femme fatale*. While Martin encapsulates the vibrancy of the Middle Eastern dancer, the artist's frontispiece reduces all ambiguity. However, a half a century that followed Martin's decorative engravings, we see yet a further departure as the 2011 contemporary published edition abandons Beardsley's objective and as a result diminishes *Salomé's* alluring indeterminacies.

## 2. The Diminishing of Salomé's Alluring Indeterminacies

There is a significant contrast between the levels of interpretative possibilities when one compares Beardsley's original frontispiece to that of Barry Moser which was featured in the 2011 modern English edition of *Salomé* (Fig. 5). A straightforward portrait, Moser's work appears purely realistic and lacks the ability to engender diverse interpretations. It contrasts markedly from Beardsley's ability to translate Wilde's text in a mysterious and subtextual manner to offer the reader the opportunity to become, in Eco's terms, a co-author to the text. In comparison, Moser presents a work that is *closed*. Although Moser displays an exquisite technique and presents the reader with a beautiful work of art, the main (if not the only) possible interpretation of a Wildean portrait is a biographical commentary of the play. The addressee/reader may in fact see *Salomé* as the most autobiographical of all of Wilde's works and like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) shrouds the work with a metaphorical veil in order to mask the hidden desires of homoerotic desire<sup>10</sup>. However, an elegant yet straightforward portrait is simply that, a portrait. Unlike Beardsley, Moser declines to offer a particular commentary of Wilde's unique Symbolist work. Moser's engraving does not provide the reader any insight into an understanding of the play, nor does such a portrait incite the reader to engage with the play's subsequent text.

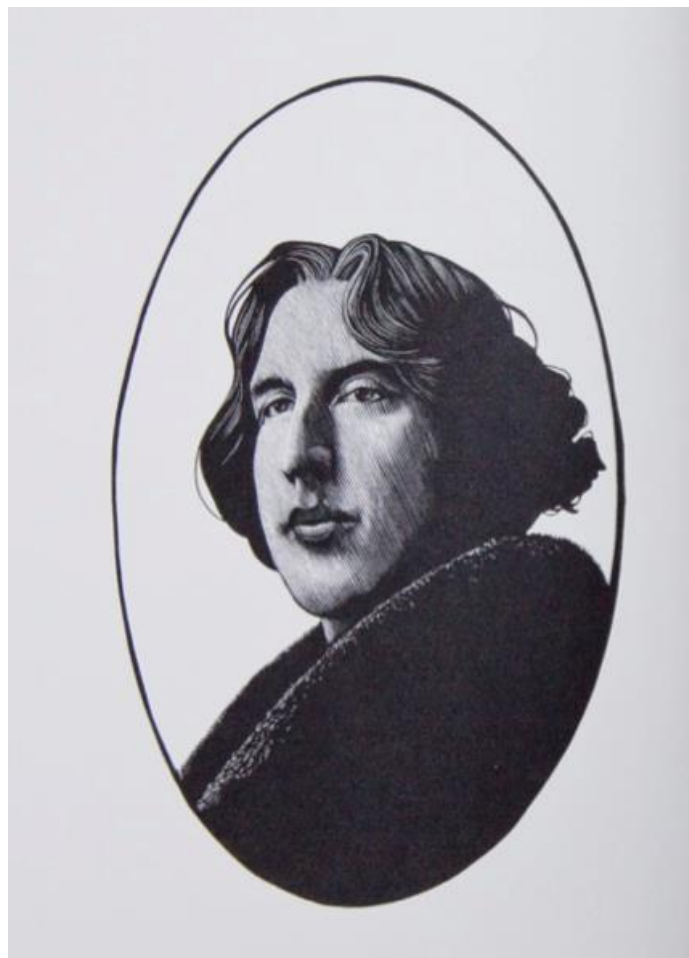


Fig. 5. Barry Moser: Frontispiece  
Engraving from *Salomé* (University of Virginia Press, 2011) with permission of the artist.

For Moser, the choice of portraiture and still life to illustrate the play requires very little critical response from the reader. One such example is the engraving entitled “Fruits are brought”, which one could consider being a reference to the King’s banquet. Unfortunately, such still-life imagery appears rather mundane and irrelevant to Wilde’s text. This image once again fails to provide the reader with an opportunity to engage with the play on a deeper semiotic level. The images are decorative and at random, neglecting any insightful commentary. In this regard, Moser misses the opportunity as an artist to enrich the play. Of course his engravings are open to interpretation and certain readers may find opportunity for such interpretation. Nonetheless, when we compare Moser’s artistic rendering to that of Beardsley’s, the rich diversity of meanings that Beardsley is able to inspire is not matched by Moser.

As previously mentioned, Beardsley utilizes the play’s frontispiece to deliver a homosexual reading of Wilde’s drama while playing with gender ambiguity in the depiction of the Young Syrian and the Page. However, Moser decides to abandon any reflection or commentary on the relationship between the two characters: their intimacy, their tragedy, or their sexuality. Instead, he prefers to offer the reader two adjacent portraits entitled “The Young Syrian” and “Herodias’s Page” (Fig. 6). The characters that in Beardsley’s illustration embodied gender and sexual ambiguities now remain fixed as separate identities with no visible connection to one another except that they exist on the same page.

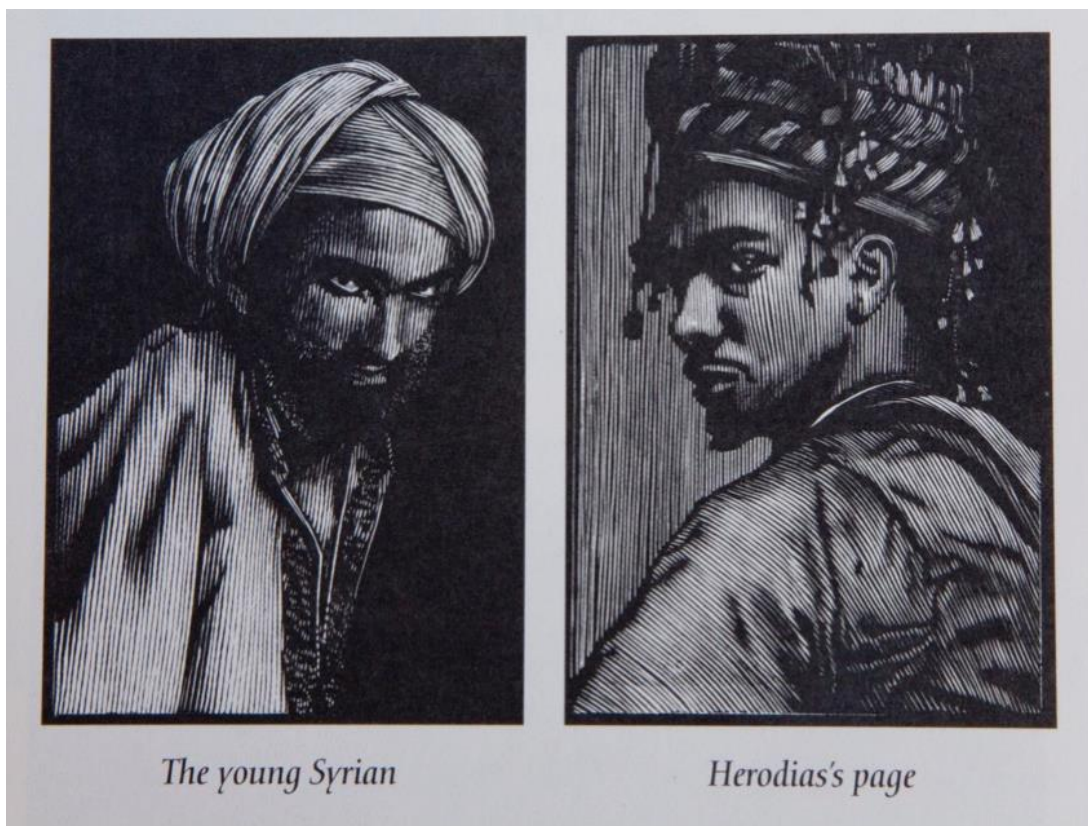


Fig. 6. Barry Moser: *The young Syrian* and *Herodias's Page*  
Engraving from *Salomé* (University of Virginia Press, 2011) with permission of the artist.

While Moser has portrayed both men of ethnic origin to perhaps familiarize the reader with the geographical location of the play, these two adjacent portraits appear purely descriptive and negate the possibility to delve deeper within Wilde's Symbolist text. Moreover, Moser has made a further departure from Beardsley's feminization of the page to disambiguate gender ambivalences within the image, hence neglecting Wilde's subliminal subtext of homoeroticism.

Existing as individual artworks separated from Wilde's texts, Moser's engravings are of high quality and certainly would find an appreciative audience for their aesthetic value. However, the declaration made on the edition's dust jacket does not support an intratextual relationship with Wilde's play:

Barry Moser is an artist who speaks the blunt yet fluent language of present-day communication through the penetrating gestural vocabulary of the graphic arts. The resulting combination of words, and images directly engages with Wilde's characters and their story, setting a bold new standard for the melding of literary and pictorial excellence. At the same time, it leads readers and audiences alike to rediscover perennially significant themes – of love, death, power, and individuality. (2011)

The above claim is not sustained within Moser's work as his engravings distance themselves from Wilde's most ambiguous text. In contrast, one should be reminded that Beardsley, as the original pictorial translator of *Salomé*, provides the reader not only an interpretative guidance but also "the potential for expansive imaginative responses" (Gillespie, 139). This becomes both an invitation and a challenge. From this perspective, artists such as Martin and Moser depart from Beardsley's visual accompaniment and therefore, the opportunity to administer a refreshing modern illustrative translation of Wilde's play.

Translation is inherently manipulative since "all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose" (Hermans 1985, 11). However, translation is first and foremost interpretation. For Eco, "a translation is an actualized and manifested interpretation—therefore an important witness" (1979, 35). When taking Eco's notion into consideration, one can apply his concept and administer it to *Salomé's* illustrations. A modern artist such as Moser abandons Eco's approach to act as an "important witness" and instead offers purely decorative images. Images, that from the perspective of this present study, do not necessarily relate to Wilde's text. Furthermore, the titles associated with his engravings such as the previously mentioned "Fruits are brought" limit their ability to create an ambiguous web of mystery and intrigue. Titles, such as those that Beardsley's cryptic nature provided, seduces the reader to venture forward and discover their original aesthetic judgements that will in turn interact and influence their individual reading of Wilde's play.

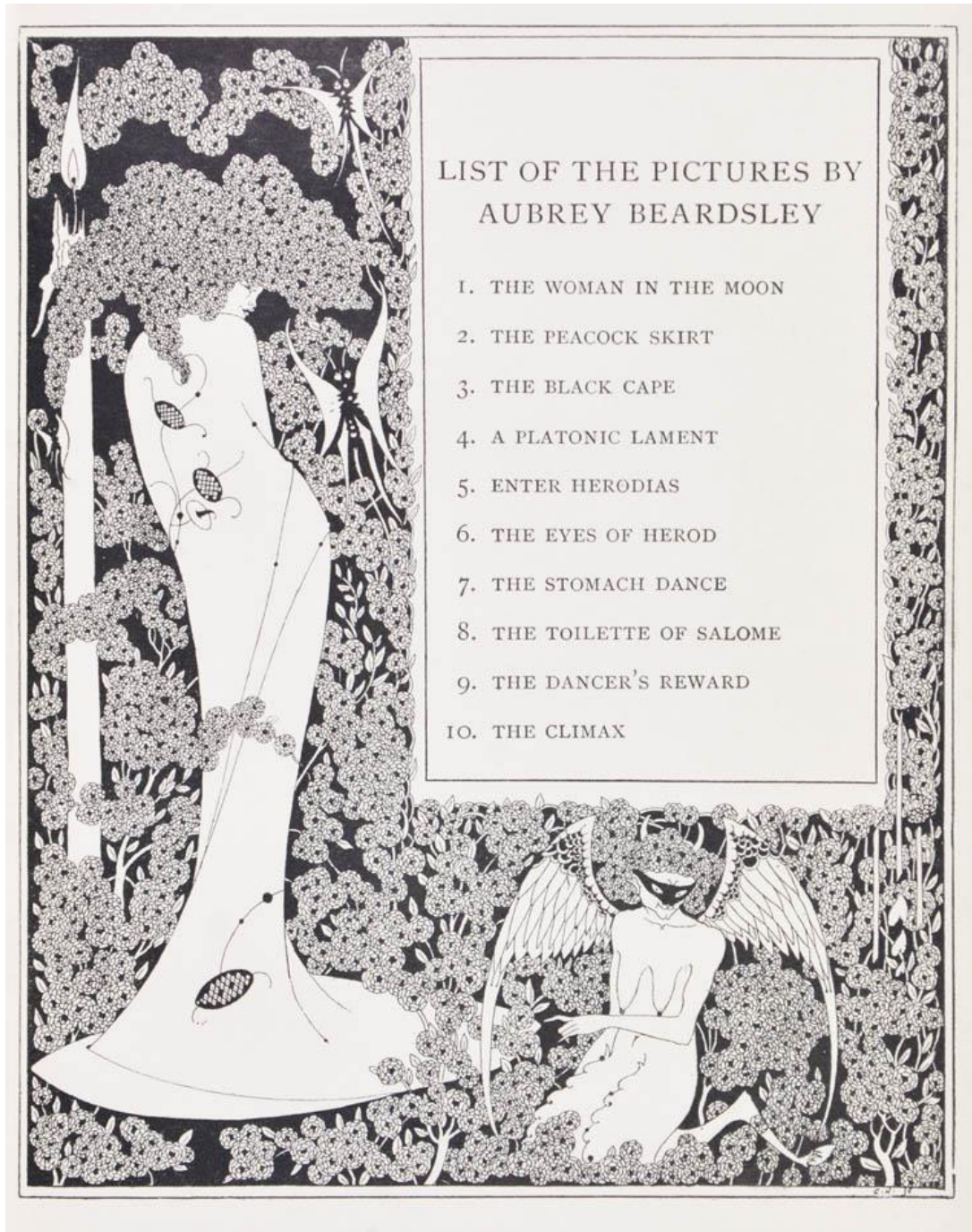


Fig. 7. Aubrey Beardsley: *List of Pictures* (1894)

Beardsley positions a chronological “List of Pictures” (Fig. 7) within *Salomé*’s opening pages so that his artistic interpretation acts as a prelude to the play. Such a paratextual feature is a foretaste to the ambiguities residing in the forthcoming text. The position of the “List of Pictures” which immediately follows *Salomé*’s frontispiece and title page reinforces Genette’s notion that the paratext is rather a “threshold” or a “vestibule that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (1997, 2). The *Salomé* reader stands at this threshold, the “List of Pictures” acts as a gateway to the play and entices the reader for further exploration. Genette speaks

of “an edge” or “a fringe” to explain the zone which “controls one’s whole reading of the text”. Genette elaborates:

Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (1997, 2)

The list of titles naming Beardsley’s forthcoming illustrations certainly offers the reader a “better reception for the text” in assisting him or her to decode the ambiguous nature of the play. Beardsley’s own ambiguous interpretations of the play are already evident in the ambivalent naming of each drawing: *The Woman in the Moon*, *The Peacock Skirt*, *The Black Cape*, *A Platonic Lament*, *The Eyes of Herod*, *The Stomach Dance*, *The Dancer’s Reward* and *The Climax*. Such titles constitute an ambiguous narrative in and of themselves.

In this way, Beardsley’s “List of Pictures” advances the semiotic nature of illustration. Allen suggests, that “decisions as to what paintings are to hung together, or what paintings to reproduce within a book, set up relations between individual paintings which normally could not have been part of their original design and intention” (2011, 172). However, such a mosaic in the hands of an artist like Beardsley becomes predominantly ambiguous. In this regard, the reader once again becomes the co-author as he or she derives their personal interpretation of Wilde’s play. For Eco, the essential concept of interpretation is compelled by the text itself and as such, *Salomé*’s illustrated and titled paratext “tells us which kind of reader it postulates. The exactness of the textual project makes for the freedom of its Model Reader” (1979, 10). Beardsley foresees a model of the *Salomé* reader who is “able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author (in this case the illustrator) deals generatively with them” (1979, 7). Beardsley’s “List of Pictures” disclose the action of the play “by clearly calling for a very specialized kind of reader” (1979, 7), nourished by the ambivalent nature of the play’s paratext.

In a similar fashion to *Salomé*’s frontispiece and title page, the “List of Pictures” is encased within the depravity of Beardsley’s underworld. The overpowering figure that is the sexually suggestive Salomé, her formfitting dress accentuating her elegant yet foreboding stance, is sexually intensified by her concealed hands and inward angle of her arms “a position Beardsley repeatedly employed in other pictures to suggest masturbation” (Snodgrass 1995, 63). Her over shoulder provocative smirk shuns “the grotesque molten wax on the phallic candle” (Snodgrass 1995, 63). She is no ordinary woman but a dangerous *femme fatale*, threatening in her omnipresence.

As Salomé shuns the phallic candle, she supersedes the hermaphrodite deity from the previous title page hijacking its feminine attributes. For example, the hermaphrodite who is flanked by two candles becomes a woman, as Beardsley “seems to have addressed a key problematical element, in

effect splitting the hermaphrodite in half” (Snodgrass 1995, 63). One could interpret that Salomé takes possession of the feminine candle as she internalizes her masculine traits, hiding them from outside appearances. Seated beside her, the kneeling yet fallen angel appears monstrous. Her aged and sagging breasts perpetuate the theatricality of the occult. A horned and winged angel, she emerges as the perverse and animalistic seraph to demonize the validity of ancient wisdom. Wearing a mask, she hides her identity to suggest an element of deception and trickery.

When Salomé leers with lascivious interest, glancing maliciously towards the “List of Pictures”, she attracts yet repels. Her sly look peers menacingly through the multitude of surrounding roses that are not simply woven throughout her tresses but become a large ornamental headpiece. As a result an element of artificiality heightens her intrigue when Beardsley adorns her with a large obscure crown. Salomé curiously averts her glance to the cryptic titles enticing the reader to step over the threshold as he or she decides to either turn back or venture forth into *Salomé's* tale of perversion. If the reader does decide to venture forth into the Salomé story, he or she encounters an obscure text.

When artists neglect Beardsley's taste for ambiguity and create decorative illustrations to provide the visual accompaniment, we see a significant decline in the levels of ambiguity. Both the play's poetics and aesthetics are altered in a compelling way. The modern 2011 English edition makes such a significant departure from Wilde's text and therefore yields to a semiotic reduction, which, in turn, drastically restricts the reader's interpretative possibilities. In order for a modern adaptation to remain consistent with a symbolist inspired work such as *Salomé*, a contemporary adaptation of *fin-de-siècle* decadent culture, the published editions of the play could benefit from employing illustrators who work in harmony with the *intentio operis* (the text's intention) and the *intentio auctoris* (the author's intention). Contemporary artists who have excelled in this manner have often engaged in an intertextual dialogue with Beardsley's original work.

### **3. The Intertextual Dialogue Between the Perverse and the Obscure**

When we consider that intertextuality can often radically challenge established accounts of non-literary art forms (Allen 2011, 171), it seems logical that artists who have been inspired by the Salomé story have often engaged in a semiotic dialogue with Wilde's text through the imitation of Beardsley's illustrations. Beardsley's illustrations, therefore, prompt reflections on the nature of intertextuality. Allen reminds us that it is possible to speak of the ‘language’ of painting as it is also possible to use this term when examining the intertextual relationship of both cinema and architecture for example (2011, 169). The language of painting involves “productions of complex patterns of encoding, re-encoding, allusion, echo, transposing of previous systems and codes” (Allen 2011, 169). Allen further elaborates:

To interpret a painting or a building we inevitably rely on the ability to interpret that painting's or building's relationship to previous ‘languages’ or ‘systems’ of painting or architectural design. Films,

symphonies, buildings, paintings, just like literary texts, constantly talk to each other as well as talking to the other arts. (2011, 169-170)

A cross-disciplinary approach allows theoretical interests to overlap. In this regard, applying theories of intertextuality to the study of non-literary arts offers an invaluable insight into an artist's dominant influences and the way in which such influences engage in a critical dialogue with one another. Wilde's *Salomé* seems especially well adapted to this type of study when we consider the number of illustrated published editions of Wilde's *Salomé* both in the original French (Alastair) and various English and German (Behmer) translations. While the 2011 illustrated English edition departs from Beardsley's skilful intratextual dialogue with Wilde's text, artists such as Alastair or Marcus Behmer remained faithful to their predecessor and consistent in establishing the required visual poetics of ambiguity. As previously discussed, *Salomé*'s original illustrated English edition offers a unique relationship between word and image. Wilde's text and Beardsley's illustrations are interconnected and are closely related to one another as the intratextual element initiates a complementary dialogue to illuminate the subtextual codes of interpretation within the play. Taking this into consideration, Japanese illustrator Takato Yamamoto is one living artist in particular who possesses the appropriate diegetic proficiency akin to Beardsley in order to engage the reader in an innovative multiplicity of interpretations while remaining faithful to *Salomé*'s poetic and visual obscurity.

Born in Akita, Japan in 1960, Yamamoto is renowned for developing his own bold and innovative style that he termed "Heisei aestheticism". Using traditional techniques, the principle of "Heisei aestheticism" rests on the amalgamation of Japanese *ukiyo-e* painting with Western gothic art to imply a surrealist narrative. Yamamoto creates a phantasmagorical world brimming with morbid depictions of perverse beauty as he exhibits confronting images of sex and death. His alluring subjects transcend gender as they engage in surreal and often adverse acts outside the safe, the known and the natural. Yamamoto is an artist whose work has been profoundly influenced by Beardsley and provides an excellent example of an intertextual dialogue between two artists. In Yamamoto's work, Steiner's discussion of intertextuality comes into play as she views that:

it is only by viewing paintings in light of other paintings or works of literature, music, and so forth that the 'missing' semiotic power of pictorial art can be augmented – which is to say that the power is not missing at all, but merely absent in the conventional account of the structure of art. (1985, 58)

Yamamoto has yet to publish an illustrated edition of Wilde's *Salomé*. However, his two paintings entitled "Salome" (2005) (Fig. 8) and "J'ai Baisé Ta Bouche Jokanaan" (2005) (Fig. 9) resonate with Beardsley's controversial and troubling beauty. Beardsley's work bears a strong resemblance to Japanese art and although Wilde himself was initially expecting a Byzantine style similar to Gustave Moreau, he found the Japanese style "quite wonderful" and recognized "the homicidal energy of Beardsley's work" (Ellmann 1988, 376)<sup>11</sup>. Yamamoto, within the context of his

cultural inheritance, pushes the taboo of erotic art to the extreme. Although perhaps not unique to the Japanese tradition of depicting images of women in severe and sexually explicit drawings, Yamamoto's translation of the Salomé story transgresses the boundaries of the illustrated book.



Fig. 8. Takato Yamamoto: *Salome* (2005) with permission of the artist.



Fig. 9. Takato Yamamoto: *J'ai Baisé Ta Bouche Jokanaan* (2005) with permission of the artist.

The painting which best illustrates Beardsley's profound influence on Yamamoto's work captures Wilde's iconic closing monologue where Salomé addresses the severed head of the prophet. The composition of "J'ai Baisé Ta Bouche Jokanaan" is a direct parody of Beardsley's tenth and last full-page illustration entitled "The Climax" whereby Salomé appears to be suspended in air, gazing

with intensity at the bleeding head held between her hands. Yamamoto replicates Beardsley's gender inversion whereby "the two feminized faces closely resemble rather than exactly reflect one another" suggesting "female homoeroticism" (Fernbach 2002, 57). While Beardsley obscures Salomé's hair to depict locks "dancing like two snakes" (Kuryluk 1987, 237) Yamamoto relies on the traditional tightly bound Japanese hairstyle, accentuating her feminized features. The free flowing hair of Jokanaan also reinforces his feminine attributes. Both Beardsley and Yamamoto engage in gender ambiguity as they abandon "the grotesque in favour of mythical pathos". (Kuryluk 1987, 237)

Similar to Beardsley, Yamamoto's drawings invite the reader to view his work as part of a visual translation to the play. It is not surprising that Beardsley's illustrations form the perfect accompaniment to Wilde's text. The text's repetitive language becomes a sensual cantata, the repeated metaphors strengthening the visual imagination making the transition to the visual narrative a harmonic process. The numerous and repetitive descriptions of the moon, for example, establish a narrative arch while illuminating Salomé's character as she journeys from virginal white to murderous red. Yamamoto supports the moon narrative in his work. As Salomé holds the severed head in her hands, the prophet's head appears to be on a red bloody platter as the moon has the dual purpose of depicting both death and beauty. Yamamoto evokes both erotic sensuality and horror as the dominant colour pattern within the picture evokes metaphysical qualities of both physical and spiritual desires.

While Beardsley's "The Climax" depicts the prophet's blood as it drips from the Jokanaan's severed head, Yamamoto's prophet almost seems as if his head is served on a bloody platter. The black coils of free flowing hair conjure up images of Beardsley's snake-like locks. The red of the moon stands in stark contrast to the composition's black and white tones. Yamamoto's "J'ai Baisé Ta Bouche Jokanaan" serves as an example of the illustrator's illicit intertextuality with Beardsley's art, seeking to derive its meaning through referencing "The Climax". Salomé's final monologue is transcended at a symbolic level to capture the grotesque intensity of Wilde's text.

In "Salomé", Yamamoto takes the near naked princess from "J'ai Baisé Ta Bouche Jokanaan" and thrusts the female image into the extremes of illicit and pornographic sex. Her eyes are no longer closed while floating in the midst of ecstasy, rather Salomé stares intently at the viewer in an almost provoking manner. While pushing her bare legs apart, her naked sex is salaciously hidden by the prophet's severed head as Yamamoto alludes to the debased act of necrophilia. Engaging in cunnilingus, the androgynous head drips blood onto a small platter. The scarlet moon hovering in the background mirrors the prophet's blood. This is the lascivious Salomé at her most diabolical. She relishes in the combined pleasure of murder and erotic sexuality.

Having produced two illustrations inspired by Wilde's *Salomé*, Yamamoto excels in capturing the essential core elements of ambiguity residing in Wilde's Symbolist text. Combined with Yamamoto's striking and provoking illustrations, a new and improved English illustrated edition would serve as an exquisite volume and state-of-the-art publication. Such an edition is capable of showcasing *Salomé's* unique collaboration of text and image. The intratextual correlation that

Beardsley achieved triumphs as the play's intrinsic aesthetic feature. Providing a visual narrative enhances the reader's experience as he or she is immediately thrust into the thresholds of interpretation by *Salomé's* visual narrative beginning with the power of the visual paratext.

This study has demonstrated the manner in which the contextual relationship between image and text provides two distinct functions of semiotics, which through their forced intratextual union, initiate an accelerated degree of interpretation. Taking this into consideration, a diachronic approach provides insight for a better understanding and appreciation of the potentials and limitations of the decorated book. The artists who provided the visual dialect for the two subsequent *Salomé* editions (1957 and 2011) that followed the original English translation (1894) deviated from the high level of ambiguity originally established by Beardsley. This can be seen particularly in the blurring of gender. Both Martin's and Moser's depictions of the various characters in *Salomé* remain within the confines of masculinized males and subservient females. The most significant example of such a closed work is the play's paratext. While Beardsley offers the reader an array of possible interpretations due to the visual ambiguity of the grotesque, both Martin and Moser offer purely decorative engravings that diminish the number of possible readings. If we take for instance Eco's description of an open work in the visual arts: "the kind of painting that thrives on ambiguity, indeterminacy, the full fecundity of the informal, the kind of painting that wants to offer the eye the most liberating adventure while remaining a form of communication" (1989, 98), we receive a more stimulating experience from Beardsley's compelling visual translation of Wilde's work.

*Salomé* is an "open work" providing the reader with multiple interpretations. The play's strength lies in its ability to suggest rather than to prescribe a univocal reading. *Salomé* "relies upon the imagination of the reader to complete the aesthetic experience that the work itself only suggests" (Gillespie 1996, 153). This study has promoted an insistence on pluralism to enhance such an aesthetic and interpretative experience of *Salomé's* visual paratext. Beardsley, like Wilde, is an artist that continues to bewilder admirers of the decorated book and who prevails as a strong witness to the persistence of Victorian culture in our contemporary society. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader holds the physical illustrated book in his or her hands and opens the cover to Wilde's *Salomé*, he or she is transported into a world of symbols, decadence and most of all poetic beauty. The crisp sound of the turning of the first page marks the beginning of the play as the curtain dramatically rises to reveal the power of the visual paratext and enduring force of the *fin-de-siècle* attack.

### **Endnotes:**

1. The study of intratextuality deals with the internal relations within the text in contrast to intertextuality, which involves external relations to other texts.
2. Bitextuality, a term coined by Kooistra, "incorporates the strategies of both visual and verbal interpretation in order to understand how the dialogue between picture and word produces meaning within a network of cultural discourses. Representation – whether verbal or visual – is best understood as a social relationship in which various forms of power, knowledge and desire are enacted and disseminated. The marriage of image and text operates within this kind of social structure" (Kooistra 1995, 5).

3. "An open text is a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantic-pragmatic device whose foreseen interpretation is a part of its generative process" (Eco 1979, 3), Semantico [Semantics]
4. For Genette, the paratext "is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (1997, 1).
5. Frankel supports this theory when he states: "In fact, the censor's ban itself became a sign of the play's decadence; it was cited in a number of reviews of the 1893 edition as well as in Bodley Head's advertising for the play" (2000, 54).
6. Navarre (1995) offers a detailed account of Salomé's original English edition title page (See pages 104-116). Navarre questions the play's Anglicized version of the title: "Why the accent aigu does not appear on the title-page of the 1894 Bodley Head edition remains a mystery" (1995, 104). Although one may determine that Navarre's query is quite obvious, due to the fact that the English edition requires an Anglicized title to correspond to an English translation, the two subsequent English translations used for this study (Holland and Donohue) both use the accent aigu (Salomé) for the play's title.
7. The printed text of Salomé is cited from the bi-lingual edition (Paris, Flammarion, 2006), which presents the first English translation on the page opposite the French version.
8. It is interesting to note that "The Stomach Dance", which portrays Salomé's "dance of the seven veils", chronologically occupies the seventh illustration.
9. Barre: a handrail placed at hip height, used by a dancer to maintain balance during practice.
10. See Kate Millet (1971) and Elaine Showalter (1990).
11. Wilde stated: "They are all too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine. My Herod is like the Herod of Gustave Moreau - wrapped in jewels and sorrows. My Salome is a mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Sainte Thérèse who worships the moon" (Julian 1969, 257, quoted by Ricketts in Recollections of Oscar Wilde (1932).

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